

## WELCOME TO THE MACHINE: THOUGHTS ON WRITING FOR SCHOLARLY PUBLICATION

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### Abstract

The expression 'publish or perish' has probably never been as cruelly applicable as it is today. Universities in many countries now require their staff to publish in major, high-impact, peer-reviewed Anglophone journals as a pre-requisite for tenure, promotion and career advancement, making participation in this global web of scholarship an obligation for academics all over the world. Junior scholars therefore suddenly find themselves having to navigate the unfamiliar and dangerous waters of the international publication process. But while this all looks rather daunting, it serves important learning purposes for novice authors and with some planning and care, the process need not be as traumatic as it first seems. In this short forum piece I want to support the editors of this new journal in encouraging aspiring scholarly writers in their efforts to share their research as broadly as possible, thus bringing work that would otherwise remain local to the attention of international audiences.

**Keywords:** academic publishing, new researchers, journals

### Publication as struggle

International publishing means publishing in English. Research shows that academics all over the world are increasingly less likely to publish in their own languages and to find their English language publications cited more often. References to English language publications, for example, have reached 85% in French science journals and English makes up over 95% of all publications in the *Science Citation Index*. Swales (2004) observes that many leading European and Japanese journals have switched to publishing in English and this Anglicization of published research can also be seen in the dramatic increase in papers written by non-native English speakers in leading English language journals (e.g. Wood, 2001).

But with financial incentives for academics in some countries, requirements for students to publish before they can graduate, and a massive increase in submissions from writers in China and Iran, competition to publish is now fiercer than ever and rejection rates for some journals are as high as 93%. Many prestigious Chinese universities, for example, stipulate that their PhD students must have at least one paper accepted by an international journal before they can graduate, while the Chinese Academy of Sciences supplements the salaries of researchers who have published internationally (Cargill & O'Connor, 2006). With libraries

increasingly subscribing to online versions of journals, the impact of English becomes self-perpetuating, since it is in these journals where authors will be most visible on the world stage and receive the most credit.

While it is possible to see the growth of English as establishing a neutral lingua franca, efficiently facilitating the free exchange of knowledge across the globe, or as a tool of linguistic hegemony and cultural imperialism, the dominance of English seems something that we have to live with for the time being. Opting out of this global web of scholarship is not an option for many academics as publication has become inseparable from the process by which prestige and credibility are assessed. Publication equals 'productivity' for many universities and is used as a crude measure of worth, while scholars who want their work to be widely read and frequently cited have to learn to play the game.

### **Academic English as a second language**

Clearly a paper will only find its way to publication if the writer is familiar with the content knowledge and methodologies of a particular field, but it must also display a competence in disciplinary specialized discourse conventions. A paper needs to frame ideas and employ forms of argument which readers are likely to find familiar and appropriate, and learning to write like an insider is part of the game.

Non-Native English speakers (NNES) find these requirements particularly daunting and journal publishers and editors have viewed the surge of NNES activity in the publishing arena with some alarm. This is particularly the case in the sciences, where editors often insist on having submissions vetted by native English speakers, frequently requiring writers to pay copy editors to correct their prose before it is accepted. Research has also revealed concerns among Non-Native English scholars themselves. Over half of the nearly 600 Hong Kong Chinese academics in Flowerdew's (1999) survey, for example, felt language issues to be a serious obstacle to their publication ambitions, while Li (2006) and Gosden (1995) report the laborious revision processes of NNES writers as they responded to the advice of reviewers and colleagues through several painstaking resubmissions. While editors vehemently assert that decisions on a manuscript are primarily based on scientific merit, in a context where editors are overwhelmed with submissions and are often looking for reasons to reject manuscripts, non-standard language may serve as good a reason as any to justify this.

But while most research attention has focused on the obstacles faced by Non-Native English speaking researchers in getting into print, academic English is not anyone's native language. Native English speakers (NES) also struggle to produce polished texts (Casanave & Vandrick,

2003) and editors frequently point out that many difficulties are experienced by both groups (e.g. Gosden, 1992). Swales (2004, p.56), in fact, argues that the most important distinction in publishing is not between native and non-native English speakers but 'between experienced or 'senior' researcher/scholars and less experienced or 'junior' ones – between those who know the academic ropes in their chosen specialisms and those who are learning them.' There is certainly something to this view, as the growing proportion of papers by L2 authors in refereed English language journals testifies. In fact, most submissions and published papers in journals right across the academic spectrum are now written by authors from outside the traditional English-speaking countries.

Although all novice writers may struggle with the linguistic and rhetorical conventions required to get their work published, referees typically offer a great deal of unsolicited language assistance on submissions and many editors go out of their way to help authors prepare promising manuscripts for publication (Casanave, 2008). In addition, suggestions for would-be authors regularly occur in the pages of science journals (e.g. Jaffe, 2003; Tychinin & Kamnev, 2005) while publisher editing initiatives, such as Elsevier's *Webshop*, or mentoring and training resources, such as *AuthorAID*, are designed to provide authors with tools to improve the quality of their submissions.

In fact, this revision process is a key to successful publication. The 2010 statistics for *Applied Linguistics*, for example, show that while only one paper from 300 submissions was accepted outright, 31% were sent back for revisions and about half of these were eventually accepted. But while the message here is clearly that one needs to persevere, the process of revising a paper and responding to editorial changes can be a fraught one for novice writers. Not only must they rewrite and polish what may have taken months to craft in order to situate their work more centrally in the concerns of the discipline, but they must also incorporate others' views, relinquishing some of their textual ownership. Advice, moreover, may be given by a significant number of mediators, or what Lillis and Curry (2006) call 'literacy brokers', who can influence the text in important ways. So while revision may be painful, this advice can be extremely valuable as it represents a reworking of the rhetorical goals of a paper to more clearly meet the perceived needs of readers.

### **Publication as situated learning**

Situated learning and social constructionist perspectives suggest that this redrafting process is not just the transformation of a text, but also the apprenticing of an individual writer into the knowledge constructing practices of a discipline (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Scholarly writing is a situated practice and the local interactions that occur in negotiating the passage of a paper to

publication suggests that participation functions as a mode of learning. Learning to write for a professional peer audience is the process by which novices are socialised into an academic community: it is the recognised route to insider status. If we think of writing for publication as a form of apprenticeship, we can see it involves negotiation with two principal audiences: the community of scholars who will read the finished paper and hopefully cite it and use it in their own research; and the journal gatekeepers who will judge the paper as ready for publication.

In terms of the community audience, we need to see texts as the outcome of interactions among academics engaged in a web of professional and social associations. The ways writers present their topics, signal their allegiances, and stake their claims represent careful negotiations with, and considerations of, their colleagues, so that their writing displays a professional competence in discipline-approved practices. In other words, writers must be aware of the distinctive ways of identifying issues, asking questions, addressing literature, criticizing colleagues, and presenting arguments which readers anticipate in their field (Hyland, 2004).

An important consideration here is the need to balance a personal stance against the demands and expectations of the professional discourse community. Novice writers often believe that they have to strive for an original voice in order to be noticed, but this is not only risky, as this may fail to hit the mark, but it also fails to grasp the essentially social nature of writing for publication. Originality is not the expression of an autonomous self but of writing which is embedded in and built on the existing theories, discourses and topics already legitimated in the community. Ryoku Kubota, a NNEST academic working in the US, gives this advice to novice writers:

In my experience, the more the publishing community recognises the credibility of my work, the more I feel empowered to explore alternative ways of expressing ideas. Thus it is advisable for a writer to follow closely the conventions at least in the initial stages of writing for publication in order to gain the cultural capital that will facilitate her or his initiation into the academic community. (Kubota, 2003, p. 65) This doesn't mean subordinating a personal voice to the machine of disciplinary convention, but reflecting on, becoming aware of, and trying out the persuasive options the discipline makes available. It means learning the trade and building confidence through reading and through submitting papers for publication.

This process of writing and publishing research papers reveals both the regulating mechanisms of a particular discourse community and the dynamism of its practices, at least partly because the norms of the discipline are constantly defined and changed through the participation of newcomers to the discipline.

### **Tackling 'isolation'**

A central cause of difficulty for novice writers, particularly those working outside the metropolitan centres of research, is their isolation from current literature and the demand that they situate their work in a rhetorical tradition. Clearly familiarity with the literature of the field is a key component of success and it is difficult to see how it is possible to participate in disciplinary debates without access to sources and considerable reading. But we can also understand 'isolation' in a broader way than this. Gosden (1992, p.115) summarises the views of his sample of journal editors like this:

The broad term 'isolation' covers many causes, for example: not carefully reading 'Instructions to Authors'; unfamiliarity with the journal and its academic level; not previewing previous literature well and relating to others' work, possibly due to a lack of literature/library facilities; a lack of awareness of what constitutes publishable research; and unfamiliarity with the broad (and unwritten) 'rules of the game'.

While the 'rules of the game' are acquired only slowly, some aspects of this 'isolation' can be rectified by some simple online research and reading of potential target journals.

One of the most important findings of research into successful writing is that writers consider their readers, even before they begin to write. For publishing authors a key aspect of this involves writing with a specific journal in mind (and revising for another if it is subsequently rejected). This means ensuring that the paper will both address the relevant audience and be presented in the appropriate way. While this might be a somewhat tedious part of publishing, there is really no way round it and a few hours of intensive surfing of publishers' web sites getting to know the requirements and kinds of submissions they are looking for can help avoid an editorial rejection before reviewers have even seen the paper. One obvious advantage of targeting a specific journal is that you can avoid having a submission returned to you because the manuscript is improperly formatted, uses the wrong referencing conventions, is too long or too short, or because the topic is not appropriate for the journal. My co-editor and I at *Applied Linguistics*, for example, reject over a third of all submissions before they are even sent out for review because authors haven't troubled to read the journal or its requirements.

Researching journal webpages can provide an idea of the academic level at which the journal is pitched, an understanding of the sort of papers it publishes and a familiarity with its intended readership. Information on journals can be found directly from the publishers' websites or through these websites:

*Thompson ISI website* journal page <http://www.isinet.com/journals/>

ISI Master Journal List <http://science.thomsonreuters.com/mjl/>

*Genamics JournalSeek* <http://journalseek.net/hum.htm>

*Science Direct* – 1800 Elsevier journals <http://www.sciencedirect.com/>

### **The paper-journal ‘fit’**

Successful papers also reveal the writer’s knowledge of the market for the paper in the sense that it is relevant to the audience and timely in its appearance. These two factors may be more important than originality in getting a paper published, and while such decisions clearly involve a knowledge of the field and its current literature, they also relate to the question of finding the right niche for the topic. The chances of successful publication are improved by a clear understanding of one’s own work and positioning in relation to the literature. It can help to summarise core aspects of the (planned) paper with a series of one-sentence statements concerning the topic, the approach, the issues it addresses in the prior literature, what is novel in the paper, and who it will most interest.

This reflection on, and explicit understanding of, one’s own paper makes it easier to then target a range of potential journals. Looking at back issues to establish the relevance and suitability of the paper for a journal is time well spent, gaining familiarity with the type of papers a journal publishes, the stance or approach it favours, the background knowledge and orientation of its readers, and the composition of its editorial board (do you identify with them and see them as a possible community?). As editors often send papers to be refereed by members of the board who may be in the reference list of the submitted paper, additional attention can be given to researching the views and possible responses of this group to the paper.

Achieving a good fit between a paper and a particular journal also involves making some hard decisions about the quality of the work in relation to the prestige of the target periodical. Obviously, the greater the prestige of the publication, the greater the competition there is to publish in it and the less chance there is of being successful, but everyone wants their work published in the most authoritative and widely read journals in the field. All publications have a subjective ranking in a discipline from the ‘blue chip’ through the solidly respectable and beyond and experienced disciplinary insiders are likely to be familiar with the fine gradations that distinguish journals, but which are often difficult for newcomers to judge. Such discriminations are part of the intellectual stock-in-trade of the successful academic and an understanding of them is important both in terms of a successful publishing outcome and the degree of credit that is likely to accrue to the writer from acceptance.

Prestige is a slippery term and numerous features contribute to it. The status of the publisher and the eminence of its editorial board, its high rejection rates, its policy of double blind peer review, and its easy access to readers though international and rapid online and paper distribution are all important. The most widely acknowledged measure of prestige, however, and the only one regarded as important by most universities, however, is that it has a quoted 'impact factor' (the number of citations to that journal compared with the papers it has published over a period). This means that it figures in the journal rankings in the prestigious Science Citation Index (SCI), available online through the *Web of Science* which lists the top 3700 journals across 100 disciplines at

[http://thomsonreuters.com/products\\_services/science/science\\_products/a-z/isi\\_web\\_of\\_knowledge/](http://thomsonreuters.com/products_services/science/science_products/a-z/isi_web_of_knowledge/).

Having an idea of the impact factor of a target journal can provide a better understanding of the relative risks and rewards of seeking to publish in particular journals and make more accurate assessments of the possible chances of success.

### **Navigating peer review**

A final area of reported difficulty for apprentice scholars, and one I mentioned briefly above, is navigating the mechanisms of peer-review and editorial commentary. While the majority of reviewers take considerable care to frame negative reviews in a helpful, collegial way, many novice writers are so disheartened by criticism that they give up at this point. Learning to accept criticism, understand comments, and negotiate the demands of reviewers requires both open-mindedness and determination, but these are key strategies of publishing success.

It is helpful if writers can see their submission not as a single text but as part of a *genre set*, the productive and receptive genres which together contribute to a paper's eventual acceptance. Some of these genres are found in the pages of the journal and include the aims and scope, editorial board list, and instructions for authors. Other genres, however, work to ensure that a paper is not just shaped by the author but is influenced by the professional community through the suggestions of reviewers and editors and these include referees' reports and the editor's summary and directions. Frequently, however, novice authors complain that they can't understand the point behind reviewers' comments or the action which the editor is recommending. Criticisms are often hedged, phrased as questions or put in the form of gentle suggestions rather than as required changes and, while motivated by politeness, this doesn't help the writer to see what changes they need to make. Interpreting editors' letters, deciding whether the overall tone is an encouraging 'revise and resubmit' or contains the implicit advice to submit elsewhere, and deciding which comments on a draft

should be revised and which not, are important skills in the publishing game, but once more, are acquired only through familiarity unless there is an experienced mentor at hand.

A final genre that it is helpful for novice writers to master is the covering letter to the journal editor which is returned with a revised manuscript. Most journals require resubmissions to explicitly highlight how the author has responded to reviewers' comments. The 'letter', addressed to the editor, lists the changes made, noting where these appear in the revised script, and points out which suggestions have not been followed and why. Often reviewers ask for greater clarity in the exposition, better connections with prior literature and more rigour in methodology, and it is sensible to read reviewers' feedback as offering good sense and wisdom. A good review is supportive, constructive, thoughtful, and fair. It identifies both strengths and weaknesses, offers concrete suggestions for improvements and justifies the reviewer's conclusions. It is important to turn these reviews into a learning opportunity and ask what the comments say about your writing, building on them and making appropriate changes, but it is also important and valid to negotiate if the reviewer has misunderstood, stating clearly in the letter what advice has not been acted on.



### **Endnote**

There are a considerable number of books and articles giving guidance on writing for scholarly publication, but in this paper I have sought more to demystify and encourage rather than advise. My only advice to novice authors is to plan and be patient. Most of all, however, I think it is important to open up what seems a black box by going through the process with someone who has experience of publishing, or at least by having someone like this read your work and the reviewers' comments on it.

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### **Biodata**

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